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6 Oct 84

3 Soviet Submarines Said to Patrol Atlantic 'Box'

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 5 — The Soviet submarine that caught fire Friday and is now apparently crippled east of Bermuda was probably one of three Yankee-class vessels the Russians keep in a well-defined patrol region in the Atlantic, according to military experts.

The Russians have about 22 of these nuclear-armed strategic submarines, and three are in constant patrol in what the United States Navy authorities call "the box" in the mid-Atlantic. Two other Yankee-class submarines patrol a region in the Pacific.

The Navy monitors the movements of the submarines in three ways: with P-3 Orion aircraft, which drop sonar buoys; with Sosus, for sound underwater surveillance system, a set of underwater listening devices placed in strategic locations, and with tracking by the Navy's attack submarines.

Pentagon officials said that from monitoring of the submarine's communications, they were aware that some accident had taken place on board when it occurred. But it was several hours before analysts could evaluate the nature of the problem.

When they were certain that a fire had broken out, Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger was informed, meaning American officials knew of the incident before President Reagan received a message about it from Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Soviet leader.

The Yankee-class submarines in the Atlantic can carry up to 16 nuclear-tipped missiles. They are based in the Murmansk region and go out on patrol by traveling through the Barents Sea and passing the peninsula where Norway juts into the Arctic Ocean.

Before entering the Atlantic, the submarines pass through what the Navy calls the GI-UK gap, which stands for Greenland, Iceland, United Kingdom. This region, experts say, is strung with Sosus devices, which pick up the acoustical "signature" of the submarines.

American attack submarines also try to locate them up at some point. Using the signature, they are often able to identify not only the type of submarine but also the specific vessel.

The P-3 aircraft, based in Bermuda, Iceland, Maine, Florida and other places, periodically try to pinpoint the locations of the submarines.

In patrolling within "the box," the submarines generally stay at least 1,000 miles from the Eastern Seaboard and go no farther out than 2,000 miles.

When the United States deployed Pershing missiles in Europe in 1983, Moscow said it would provide an "analogous" response. In January and February of 1984, the Russians moved several submarines in the Atlantic closer to the Eastern Seaboard.

This was apparently intended to make the flight time to Washington for submarine-launched missiles similar to the time needed for European-based Pershing missiles to reach the Soviet Union. During those months, the submarines were out of "the box."

Soviet Sub Skipper Balked at Rescue

Fear or Pride May Have Been Motive, U.S. Officials Say

By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Soviet skipper whose Yankee-class missile submarine sank in the Atlantic Ocean off Bermuda before dawn Monday initially refused rescue, apparently out of fear or pride or both, U.S. officials said yesterday.

The skipper waited alone until the last minute before paddling away from the sinking submarine in his raft, sources said. He then resisted attempts to take him aboard a small boat that came alongside his raft in the 10-foot waves to ferry him to a nearby Soviet freighter, they said.

Next came a spirited radio conversation between the freighter captain and Soviet commanders ashore, said the sources. The United States apparently monitored Soviet communications during the incident.

The submarine had been ripped by fire and explosions, killing three and injuring eight members of the crew of about 120 in the Sohm Plain northeast of Bermuda, according to Defense Department officials.

"We don't know what his problem was," said an official familiar with the Soviet exchanges between sea and shore. "Maybe it was pride or fear, or maybe he wanted to paddle all the way to Virginia," a trip of about 1,300 miles, the official said.

Soviet superiors ashore sternly ordered the reluctant skipper to board the freighter, according to knowledgeable officials. He finally did so, and the freighter was last seen heading toward Cuba.

Reconstructing the situation, Navy officials gave the skipper high marks for the way he and his crew fought the fire and scuttled the ship.

For a while, they said, it looked as if the skipper might not be able to force the burning submarine to the surface. Water pouring into the ripped cap of the missile tube where the explosion occurred made the 9,300-ton submarine so heavy, they said, that it lost buoyancy at a crucial depth. The skipper brought the submarine slowly to the surface, however.

When saving the submarine appeared impossible, officials said, the skipper seemed to do a thorough job of opening valves so water would spread evenly around the submarine's nuclear reactor and other crucial components after it sank.

Even distribution reduces the risk of ruptures from varying pressures in the submarine's watery grave 3½ miles below the surface.

U.S. undersea specialists said the Soviets seemed to be trying to tow the submarine home when the salvage battle was lost. They said the Sohm Plain is covered by 15,000 to 18,000 feet of water, making them doubt the skipper was trying to reach deeper water for scuttling.

A Soviet Kirov-class cruiser patrolling farther north was ordered to the scene to help the submarine, causing further doubt that scuttling was planned immediately after the fire was extinguished.

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